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REMARKS

ON

AMERICAN HISTORY.

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AMERICAN HISTORY.

IN many respects the history of North America differs from that of every other country, and in this difference it possesses an interest peculiar to itself, especially for those, whose lot has been cast here, and who look back with a generous pride to the deeds of ancestors, by whom a nation's existence has been created, and a nation's glory adorned. We shall speak of this history, as divided into two periods, the Colonial, and the Revolutionary.

When we talk of the history of our country, we are not to be understood as alluding to any particular book, or to the labors of any man, or number of men, in treating this subject. If we have a few compilations of merit, embracing detached portions and limited periods, there is yet wanting a work, the writer of which shall undertake the task of plodding his way through all the materials, printed and in manuscript, and digesting them into a united, continuous, lucid, and philosophical whole, bearing the shape, and containing the substance of genuine history. No

tempting encouragement, it is true, has been held out to such an enterprise. The absorbing present, in the midst of our stirring politics, and jarring party excitements, and bustling activity, has almost obliterated the past, or at least has left little leisure for pursuing the footsteps of the pilgrims, and the devious fortunes of our ancestors. The public taste has run in other directions, and no man of genius and industry has been found so courageous in his resolves, or prodigal of his labor, as to waste his life in digging into mines for treasures, which would cost him much, and avail him little. But symptoms of a change are beginning to appear, which it may be hoped will ere long be realized.

And when the time shall come for illustrating this subject, it will be discovered, that there are rich stores of knowledge among the hidden and forgotten records of our colonial history, that the men of those days thought, and acted, and suffered with a wisdom, a fortitude, and an endurance, which would add lustre to any age; and that they have transmitted an inheritance as honorable in the mode of its acquisition, as it is dear to its present possessors. Notwithstanding the comparatively disconnected incidents in the history of this period, and the separate communities and governments to which it extends, it has nevertheless a *unity* and a consistency of parts, as well as copiousness of events, which make it a theme for the most gifted historian, and a study

for every one, who would enlarge his knowledge and profit by high example.

Unlike any other people, who have attained the rank of a nation, we may here trace our country's growth to the very elements of its origin, and consult the testimonies of reality, instead of the blind oracles of fable, and the legends of a dubious tradition. Besides a love of adventure, and an enthusiasm, that surmounted every difficulty, the character of its founders was marked by a hardy enterprise and sturdiness of purpose, which carried them onward through perils and sufferings, that would have appalled weaker minds and less resolute hearts. This is the first great feature of resemblance in all the early settlers, whether they came to the north or to the south, and it merits notice from the influence it could not fail to exercise on their future acts and character, both domestic and political. The timid, the wavering, the feeble-minded, the sons of indolence and ease, were not among those, who left the comforts of home, braved the tempests of the ocean, and sought danger on the shores of an unknown and inhospitable world. Incited by various motives they might have been; by a fondness for adventure, curiosity, gain, or a dread of oppression; yet none but the bold, energetic, determined, persevering, would yield to these motives or any other.

Akin to these characteristics, and indeed a concomitant with them, was a spirit of freedom, and

a restlessness under constraint. The New England settlers, we know, came away on this ground alone, goaded to a sense of their invaded rights by the thorns of religious intolerance. But whatever motives may have operated, the prominent fact remains the same, and in this we may see throughout the colonies a uniform basis of that vigor of character, and indomitable love of liberty, which appeared ever afterwards, in one guise or another, whenever occasions called them out.

Hence it was, also, that the different colonies, although under dissimilar modes of government, some more and some less dependent on the crown, preserved a close resemblance in the spirit of their internal regulations, that spirit, or those principles, which entered deeply into the opinions of the people, and upon which their habits were formed.

Beginning everywhere in small bodies, elections implied almost a universal suffrage, and every individual became acquainted with his rights, and accustomed to use the power they gave him. Increase of numbers made no change in this respect. Charters were given and taken away, laws were annulled, and the King's judges decided against the colonial pretensions. The liberties of the mass were thus abridged, and the powers of legislation curtailed, but the people still went on, voting for their representatives and their municipal officers, and practising all the

elementary acts of independent government; and the legislatures had new opportunities of asserting their rights before the world, studying them more deeply, watching over them more cautiously, and in this way gaining strength to their cause, through the agency of the very means that were employed to depress or destroy it. The primary elections were never reached by these oppressive measures of the supreme power, and, as they were founded on principles of close analogy in all the colonies, conformable to the circumstances of their origin, they were not only the guardian of the liberties of each, from its first foundation, but they became at last the cementing force, which bound them together, when a great and united effort was necessary.

Another element of unity in the colonial period was the fact of the colonists springing from the same stock; for although Holland, Germany and Sweden contributed a few settlers, yet the mass was of English origin, inheriting the free spirit that had been at work from the era of Runny Mead downwards, in building up the best parts of the British Constitution, and framing laws to protect them. The Sidneys, and Miltons, and Lockes of England were teachers in America as well as in their native land, and more effectual, because their instructions fell in a readier soil, and sprang up with a livelier and bolder growth. The books of England were the fountains of knowledge in America, from which all parts drew

equally, imbibing common habitudes of thought and opinion, and an intellectual uniformity. Our fathers soon saw, that the basis of virtue, the security of civil order and freedom, must be laid in the intelligence of the people. Schools were established and means provided, not everywhere with a zeal so ardent, and a forethought so judicious, as among the descendants of the pilgrims, but yet in all places according to their situation, and the tendency of controlling causes.

The colonial wars form another combining principle in the unity of that period, and furnish materials for vivid delineations of character and animated narrative. The English and French colonies were always doomed to espouse the quarrels and participate the broils of their rival heads in Europe, who continued to nourish a root of bitterness, that left but few intervals of peace, and fewer still of harmonious feeling. When the fire of discord was kindled into open hostility, its flame soon reached America, and roused all hearts to the conflict. Louisburg and Nova Scotia, Lake George and Braddock's field, Oswego and Niagara, have witnessed the bravery of our ancestors, and the blood they expended, fighting the battles as well of transatlantic ambition as of self-defence.

But there was a great moral cause at work in this train of events. By these trials, costly and severe as they were, the colonists were learning the extent of their physical resources, acting as

one people, gaining the experience and nerving the sinews, that were at a future day to serve them in a mightier contest. Much blood was shed, but it was the price of future glory to their country; many a fair flower was cut off in the freshness of its bloom, many a sturdy oak was felled in the majesty of its strength, yet posterity will not forget the maxim of the Roman law, that they, who fall for their country, live in the immortality of their fame.

Next come the Indian wars, which commenced, with the first landing of the pilgrim wanderers, and ceased not till the proud sons of the forest had melted away like an evening cloud, or disappeared in the remote solitudes of their own wilderness. The wars of the Indians, their character and manners, their social and political condition, are original, having no prototype in any former time or race of men. They mingle in all the incidents of our colonial history, and stamp upon it an impression novel and peculiar.

With a strength of character and a reach of intellect, unknown in any other race of absolute savages, the Indian united many traits, some of them honorable and some degrading to humanity, which made him formidable in his enmity, faithless in his friendship, and at all times a dangerous neighbor: cruel, implacable, treacherous, yet not without a few of the better qualities of the heart and the head; a being of contrasts, violent in his passions, hasty in his anger, fixed in his

revenge, yet cool in counsel, seldom betraying his plighted honor, hospitable, sometimes generous. A few names have stood out among them, which, with the culture of civilization, might have been shining stars on the lists of recorded fame. Philip, Pontiac, Sassacus, if the genius of another Homer were to embalm their memory, might rival the Hectors and Agamemnons of heroic renown, scarcely less savage, not less sagacious or brave.

Indian eloquence, if it did not flow with the richness of Nestor's wisdom, or burn with Achilles' fire, spoke in the deep strong tones of nature, and resounded from the chords of truth. The answer of the Iroquois chief to the French, who wished to purchase his lands, and push him farther into the wilderness, Voltaire has pronounced superior to any sayings of the great men commemorated by Plutarch. "We were born on this spot; our fathers are buried here. Shall we say to the bones of our fathers, arise, and go with us into a strange land?"

But more has been said of their figurative language, than seems to be justified by modern experience. Writers of fiction have distorted the Indian character, and given us anything but originals. Their fancy has produced sentimental Indians, a kind of beings that never existed in reality; and Indians clothing their ideas in the gorgeous imagery of external nature, which they had neither the refinement to conceive, nor words

to express. In truth, when we have lighted the pipe of concord, kindled or extinguished a council fire, buried the bloody hatchet, sat down under the tree of peace with its spreading branches, and brightened the chain of friendship, we have nearly exhausted their flowers of rhetoric. But the imagery prompted by internal emotion, and not by the visible world, the eloquence of condensed thought and pointed expression, the eloquence of a diction extremely limited in its forms, but nervous and direct, the eloquence of truth unadorned and of justice undisguised, these are often found in Indian speeches, and constitute their chief characteristic.

It should, moreover, be said for the Indians, that, like the Carthaginians, their history has been written by their enemies. The tales of their wrongs and their achievements may have been told by the warrior-chiefs to stimulate the courage, and perpetuate the revenge of their children, but they were traces in the sand; they perished in a day, and their memory is gone.

Such are the outlines of our colonial history, which constitute its unity, and make it a topic worthy to be illustrated by the labors of industry and talent. The details, if less imposing, are copious and varied. The progress of society developing itself in new modes, at first in isolated communities scattered along the sea-coast, and then gradually approximating each other, extending to the interior, subduing the forests with a

magic almost rivalling the lyre of Orpheus, and encountering everywhere the ferocity of uncivilized man; the plans of social government necessarily suggested by such a state of things, and their operations in the advancing stages of improvement and change; the fantastic codes of laws, and corresponding habitudes, that sprang from the reveries of our Puritan fathers; the admirable systems which followed them, conceived by men tutored only in the school of freedom and necessity, exceeding in political wisdom and security of rights the boasted schemes of ancient lawgivers; the wild and disorganizing frenzies of religious fanaticism; the misguided severities of religious intolerance; the strange aberrations of the human mind, and abuses of power, in abetting the criminal folly of witchcraft; the struggles, that were ever going on, between the Governors and the Assemblies, the former urging the demands of prerogative, the latter maintaining the claims of liberty; the sources of growing wealth; the influence of knowledge widely diffused, of religion unshackled by the trammels of power; the manners and habits of the people at different times and in different places, taking their hue from such a combination of causes; these, and a thousand other features deeply interesting and full of variety, belong to the portraiture of colonial history, giving symmetry to its parts, and completeness to the whole.

The Revolutionary period, like the Colonial, has hitherto been but imperfectly elucidated, and perhaps for the same reason. The voluminous materials, printed and unprinted, widely scattered in this country and in Europe, some obvious and well known, many unexplored, have been formidable obstacles to the execution of such an undertaking. No Rymers have yet appeared among us, who were willing to spend a life in gathering up and embodying these memorials; and, till public encouragement shall prompt and aid such a design, till the national representatives shall have leisure to pause for a moment from their weighty cares in adjusting the wheels of state, and emulate the munificent patriotism of other governments, by adopting measures to collect and preserve the perishing records of the wisdom and valor of their fathers; till this shall be done, the historian of the revolution must labor under disadvantages, which his zeal will hardly stimulate him to encounter, nor his genius enable him to surmount.

The subject itself is one of the best, that ever employed the pen of a writer, whether considered in the object at stake, the series of acts by which it was accomplished, or its consequences. It properly includes a compass of twenty years, extending from the close of the French war in America to the general peace at Paris. The best history in existence, though left unfinished, that of the Peloponnesian war, by Thucydides, embraces

exactly the same space of time, and is not dissimilar in the details of its events. The revolutionary period, thus defined, is rounded with epic exactness, having a beginning, a middle, and an end; a time for causes to operate, for the stir of action, and for the final results.

The machinery in motion is on the broadest scale of grandeur. We see the new world, young in age, but resolute in youth, lifting up the arm of defiance against the haughtiest power of the old; fleets and armies, on one side, crossing the ocean in daring attitude and confiding strength; on the other, men rallying round the banner of union, and fighting on their natal soil for freedom, rights, existence; the long struggle and successful issue; hope confirmed, justice triumphant. The passions are likewise here at work, in all the changing scenes of politics and war, in the deliberations of the senate, the popular mind, and the martial excitements of the field. We have eloquence and deep thought in counsel, alertness and bravery in action, self-sacrifice, fortitude, and patient suffering of hardship through toil and danger to the last. If we search for the habiliments of dignity with which to clothe a historical subject, or the looser drapery of ornament with which to embellish a narrative, where shall we find them thronging more thickly, or in happier contrasts, than during this period?

The causes of the revolution, so fertile a theme of speculation, are less definite than have been

imagined. The whole series of colonial events was a continued and accumulating cause. The spirit was kindled in England; it went with Robinson's congregation to Holland; it landed with them at Plymouth; it was the basis of the first constitution of these sage and self-taught legislators; it never left them nor their descendants. It extended to the other colonies, where it met with a kindred impulse, was nourished in every breast, and became rooted in the feelings of the whole people.

The revolution was a change of forms, but not of substance; the breaking of a tie, but not the creation of a principle; the establishment of an independent nation, but not the origin of its intrinsic political capacities. The foundations of society, although unsettled for the moment, were not essentially disturbed; its pillars were shaken, but never overthrown. The convulsions of war subsided, and the people found themselves, in their local relations and customs, their immediate privileges and enjoyments, just where they had been at the beginning. The new forms transferred the supreme authority from the King and Parliament of Great Britain to the hands of the people. This was a gain, but not a renovation; a security against future encroachments, but not an exemption from any old duty, nor an imposition of any new one, farther than that of being at the trouble to govern themselves.

Hence the latent cause of what has been called a revolution was the fact, that the political spirit and habits in America had waxed into a shape so different from those in England, that it was no longer convenient to regulate them by the same forms. In other words, the people had grown to be kings, and chose to exercise their sovereign prerogatives in their own way. Time alone would have effected the end, probably without so violent an explosion, had it not been hastened by particular events, which may be denominated the proximate causes.

These took their rise at the close of the French war, twelve years before the actual contest began. Relieved from future apprehensions of the French power on the frontiers, the colonists now had leisure to think of themselves, of their political affairs, their numbers, their united strength. At this juncture, the most inauspicious possible for the object in view, the precious device of taxing the colonies was resorted to by the British ministry, which, indeed, had been for some time a secret scheme in the cabinet, and had been recommended by the same sagacious governor of Virginia, who found the people in such a republican way of acting, that he could not manage them to his purpose.

The fruit of this policy was the Stamp Act, which has been considered a primary cause; and it was so, in the same sense that a torch is the

cause of a conflagration, kindling the flame, but not creating the combustible materials. Effects then became causes, and the triumphant opposition to this tax was the cause of its being renewed on tea and other articles, not so much, it was avowed, for the amount of revenue it would yield, as to vindicate the principle, that Parliament had a right to tax the colonies. The people resisted the act, and destroyed the tea, to show that they likewise had a principle, for which they felt an equal concern.

By these experiments on their patience, and these struggles to oppose them, their confidence was increased, as the tree gains strength at its root, by the repeated blasts of the tempests against its branches. From this time a mixture of causes was at work; the pride of power, the disgrace of defeat, the arrogance of office, on the one hand; a sense of wrong, indignant feeling, and an enthusiasm for liberty on the other. These were secondary, having slight connection with the first springs of the revolution, or the pervading force by which it was kept up, although important filaments in the network of history.

The acts of the revolution derive dignity and interest from the character of the actors, and the nature and magnitude of the events. It has been remarked, that in all great political revolutions, men have arisen, possessed of extraordinary endowments, adequate to the exigency of the time. It is true enough, that such revolutions, or any

remarkable and continued exertions of human power, must be brought to pass by corresponding qualities in the agents; but whether the occasion makes the men, or men the occasion, may not always be ascertained with exactness. In either case, however, no period has been adorned with examples more illustrious, or more perfectly adapted to the high destiny awaiting them, than that of the American Revolution.

Statesmen were at hand, who, if not skilled in the art of governing empires, were thoroughly imbued with the principles of just government, intimately acquainted with the history of former ages, and, above all, with the condition, sentiments, feelings of their countrymen. If there were no Richelieus nor Mazarines, no Cecils nor Chathams, in America, there were men, who, like Themistocles, knew how to raise a small state to glory and greatness.

The eloquence and the internal counsels of the Old Congress were never recorded; we know them only in their results; but that assembly, with no other power than that conferred by the suffrage of the people, with no other influence than that of their public virtue and talents, and without precedent to guide their deliberations, unsupported even by the arm of law or of ancient usages, that assembly levied troops, imposed taxes, and for years not only retained the confidence and upheld the civil existence of a distracted country, but carried through a perilous

war under its most aggravating burdens of sacrifice and suffering. Can we imagine a situation, in which were required higher moral courage, more intelligence and talent, a deeper insight into human nature and the principles of social and political organizations, or, indeed, any of those qualities, which constitute greatness of character in a statesman? See, likewise, that work of wonder, the Confederation, a union of independent states, constructed in the very heart of a desolating war, but with a beauty and strength, imperfect as it was, of which the ancient leagues of the Amphictyons, the Achæans, the Lycians, and the modern confederacies of Germany, Holland, Switzerland, afford neither exemplar nor parallel.

In their foreign affairs these same statesmen showed no less sagacity and skill, taking their stand boldly in the rank of nations, maintaining it there, competing with the tactics of practised diplomacy, and extorting from the powers of the old world not only the homage of respect, but the proffers of friendship.

The military events of the revolution, which necessarily occupy so much of its history, are not less honorable to the actors, nor less fruitful in the evidences they afford of large design and ability of character. But these we need not recount. They live in the memory of all; we have heard them from the lips of those who saw and suffered; they are inscribed on imperishable

monuments; the very hills and plains around us tell of achievements, which can never die; and the day will come, when the traveller, who has gazed and pondered at Marathon and Waterloo, will linger on the mount where Prescott fought and Warren fell, and say—Here is the field where man has struggled in his most daring conflict; here is the field where liberty poured out her noblest blood, and won her brightest and most enduring laurels.

Happy was it for America, happy for the world, that a great name, a guardian genius, presided over her destinies in war, combining more than the virtues of the Roman Fabius and the Theban Epaminondas, and compared with whom, the conquerors of the world, the Alexanders and Cæsars, are but pageants crimsoned with blood and decked with the trophies of slaughter, objects equally of the wonder and the execration of mankind. The hero of America was the conqueror only of his country's foes, and the hearts of his countrymen. To the one he was a terror, and in the other he gained an ascendancy, supreme, unrivalled, the tribute of admiring gratitude, the reward of a nation's love.

The deep interest excited by the events of war does not derive its intenseness from the numbers engaged. The army of Xerxes astounds us with its embodied millions, but it is only with Leonidas, and his three hundred Spartans, that the heart mingles its sympathies, and is agitated with

thrilling hopes and fears. Kings pursue the game of war, as men play at chess. They marshal their hosts, battles are fought, and there are conquest and defeat. We may follow their fortunes with a languid curiosity, but with no intense feeling. The reason is obvious. We can be wrought upon only by vivid impressions, and what in some way touches the springs of the human affections.

The American armies, compared with the embattled legions of the old world, were small in numbers, but the soul of a whole people centred in the bosom of these more than Spartan bands, and vibrated quickly and keenly with every incident that befell them, whether in their feats of valor, or the acuteness of their sufferings. The country itself was one wide battle-field, in which not merely the life-blood, but the dearest interests, the sustaining hopes, of every individual, were at stake. It was not a war of pride and ambition between monarchs, in which an island or a province might be the award of success; it was a contest for personal liberty and civil rights, coming down in its principles to the very sanctuary of home and the fireside, and determining for every man the measure of responsibility he should hold over his own condition, possessions, and happiness. The spectacle was grand and new, and may well be cited as the most glowing page in the annals of progressive man.

The instructive lesson of history, teaching by example, can nowhere be studied with more profit, or with a better promise, than in this revolutionary period of America; and especially by us, who sit under the tree our fathers have planted, enjoy its shade, and are nourished by its fruits. But little is our merit, or gain, that we applaud their deeds, unless we emulate their virtues. Love of country was in them an absorbing principle, an undivided feeling; not of a fragment, a section, but of the whole country. Union was the arch on which they raised the strong tower of a nation's independence. Let the arm be palsied, that would loosen one stone in the basis of this fair structure, or mar its beauty; the tongue mute, that would dishonor their names, by calculating the value of that, which they deemed without price.

They have left us an example already inscribed in the world's memory; an example, portentous to the aims of tyranny in every land; an example that will console in all ages the drooping aspirations of oppressed humanity. They have left us a written charter as a legacy, and as a guide to our course. But every day convinces us, that a written charter may become powerless. Ignorance may misinterpret it; ambition may assail and faction destroy its vital parts; and aspiring knavery may at last sing its requiem on the tomb of departed liberty. It is the spirit which lives;

in this are our safety and our hope; the spirit of our fathers; and while this dwells deeply in our remembrance, and its flame is cherished, ever burning, ever pure, on the altar of our hearts; while it incites us to think as they have thought, and do as they have done, the honor and the praise will be ours, to have preserved unimpaired the rich inheritance, which they so nobly achieved.

